

The University of Chicago

FORM AND FUNCTION OF THE
PAULINE THANKSGIVINGS

A PART OF A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE
FACULTY OF THE DIVINITY SCHOOL IN CANDIDACY
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

1935

By
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The Pauline thanksgivings need not be approached with an a priori method in the student's mind. There are several blunt, elementary and all-familiar facts about them which are in urgent need of a thorough analysis and interpretation, regardless of whether this interpretation leads to results of a larger significance or not.

(1) Seven Pauline letters begin (immediately after the so-called opening formula) with a more or less elaborate thanksgiving.

(2) The invariable position of these thanksgivings can only mean that theirs is a common function, even if it should be an unimportant one, as one must surmise, if he trusts the commentaries.

(3) Even a cursory comparison reveals that there are a number of formal resemblances as well as deep-reaching formal differences between them.

(4) The thanksgivings comprise seven, formally and functionally comparable sections, 4 vss. from Philem., 6 vss. from I Cor., 9 vss. from Phil., 10 vss. from II Thess., 10 vss. from Rom., 23 vss. from Col., and 42 vss. from I Thess., 104 vss. in all. To these may be added the only thanksgiving in the non-Pauline epistolary writings of the New Testament, Eph. 1:15-19.

(5) If it is true, as is quite generally held, that Galatians has no thanksgiving because of the embarrassing situation in Galatia, then its absence here is a most eloquent argument ex silentio that the Pauline thanksgivings are more than a dead formula or a useless if pious ornament; then, indeed, we may

reasonably expect that the positive evidence contained in the thanksgivings and in the letters which do exhibit them will tell us explicitly what their purpose, their function is.

Our first task must be to ascertain, how far the formal and functional likeness between these seven thanksgivings extends, how basic it is (if at all basic), and what the implications are for the exegetical interpretation of the thanksgivings. Naturally, the answer to these questions will also reveal the quantity as well as the significance of the peculiar features of each thanksgiving.

The only valid procedure is the inductive one; namely, to analyze the logical as well as the syntactical structure of each thanksgiving, and then to compare these seven structural patterns.

The results of this rather tedious task may be summarized under five points as follows:

(1) Each of the seven thanksgivings begins with a principal clause in which εὐχαριστῶ (in the 1. ps. sg. or pl. of the pres. ind. act.) is the typical as well as the topical verb; in other words, the addressant is the grammatical subject, and the verb-action "I give thanks" definitely dominates the entire period, indeed, the entire thanksgiving. As a matter of fact, the thanksgivings of Philem. and I Cor. consist of only this one period. These facts alone fully demonstrate the formal and functional homogeneity of the Pauline εὐχαριστῶ thanksgivings. Therefore, we may not only speak of the Pauline εὐχαριστῶ thanksgiving, but also of its structurally basic εὐχαριστῶ period.

(2) We must sharply distinguish between two structural types of the εὐχαριστῶ period, which we may designate as types (a) and (b). Type (b) is briefer and structurally more simple than type (a), and is represented by only three of the seven

thanksgivings, namely by I Cor., Rom., and II Thess. Its syntactical analysis offers no problems and no alternative.

Its basic structural pattern is indeed very simple: εὐχαριστοῦν θεῷ πάντοτε περὶ ὑμῶν--ὅτι. The principal verb is modified by three secondary syntactical units, the pers. dat. obj. (which is in all seven thanksgivings invariably τῷ θεῷ), the temporal adv. πάντοτε and the pron. obj. phrase περὶ ὑμῶν. The causal ὅτι-clause, which immediately follows, modifies the entire principal clause, not merely the verb. Following the ὅτι-clause each of these three thanksgivings exhibits a structural elaboration (and it is no more than an elaboration) which is not shared by the other two.

The syntactical analysis of the εὐχαριστοῦν period of the four remaining thanksgivings (namely, of Philem., I Thess., Col., and Phil., Eph. must also be included here) is not so readily made. Most commentators to these letters bear eloquent and confusing testimony to the fact. Much of their confusion is due to the characteristic error that they construe the examples of the more elaborate type (a) according to the simpler examples of type (b). This looks like good comparative method. In reality it is the most unpardonable kind of it, because it is arbitrary; it does not take into account all the facts, i.e., not all seven (or eight) periods; indeed, even non-Pauline and extra-biblical evidence should be comprehensively and objectively considered.

But first of all, the four examples of the type (a) must be examined by themselves. We will then discover that it is not at all difficult to determine the structural relations obtaining between the most basic syntactical units, which constitute the period. These units are, of course, the verb-forms which express the verb-subject relation. Thus we have in Philem. the simple

pattern εὐχαριστῶ--μνεῖαν ποιούμενος--ἀκούων--ὅπως--. I Thess., Col., Phil., and Eph. follow exactly the same structural pattern.

Since there are within these five examples of the type (a) a few lexicographical variations, it is advisable to formulate this structural pattern in abstract, syntactical terms which adequately fit each example. (1) The principal verb (εὐχαριστῶ); (2) a temp. part. construction which defines the action of the principal verb; this part. is always from a verb expressing intercessory prayer; (3) a second, causal part. constr., also defining the action of the principal verb; this part. is always from a verb denoting "to know"; (4) a final clause, which clearly modifies the entire principal clause.

When we now look at a table exhibiting all structural units of all seven εὐχαριστῶ periods it becomes clear that the only serious structural problem which remains, is, how to construe the adv. πάντοτε and the pron. obj. phrase περὶ ὑμῶν between the principal verb and the first, temp. part. construction. Take I Thess. as an example: εὐχαριστοῦμεν τῷ θεῷ πάντοτε περὶ ὑμῶν μνεῖαν ποιούμενοι ἐπὶ τῶν προσευχῶν ἡμῶν. Since, as we have seen, the temp. part. constr. defines εὐχαριστῶ, it is obvious that πάντοτε directly modifies εὐχαριστῶ. Μνεῖαν ποιούμενοι, however, requires most urgently a pers. object--περὶ ὑμῶν. Thus, and thus only, do we arrive at the correct interpretation of the whole clause: "I always thank God, i.e., whenever I make mention of you in my daily prayers."

That this syntactical interpretation is the correct one can be substantiated by the observation that there are, within the thanksgivings of the type (a) no less than five constructions which offer no possibility of an alternate construction.

Thus the discovery of the two types of the εὐχαριστῶ peri-

od settles a syntactical problem which would otherwise remain debatable. It also eliminates the possibility of comparing incongruent structural units. The distinction is even of value for the exegetical interpretation of the thanksgivings, as we shall see later.

(3) A third result of the structural analysis of the thanksgivings is that three thanksgivings contain considerable elements of both types of the εὐχαριστῶ period. Rom. and II Thess. begin as examples of type (b) but add elements of type (a), while I Thess. begins as an example of type (a) but shows in 2:13 a complete example of the shorter type (b). The existence of these mixed structures does not in the least invalidate the clear and fundamental distinction between the two separate types. Café au lait does not disprove the separate existence of milk and coffee. But I shall resist the fascinating temptation to compare one type of the εὐχαριστῶ period with black coffee and the other with milk.

(4) From the point of view of appraising the functional and structural homogeneity of the thanksgivings it is, furthermore, of importance to observe that every one of the seven thanksgivings concludes with a definitely eschatological climax. If you are, as I hope and fear, in a critical mood, you may think of Rom. and Philem. as exceptions. But the terms εὐαγγέλιον, σωτηρία, δικαιοσύνη Θεοῦ and ἀποκαλύπτωμαι in Rom. 1:16 f., and Χριστός in Philem. 6 have for Paul a strong eschatological connotation, to say the least.

(5) The objective and comprehensive analysis of the structure of the thanksgivings leads to a further conclusion which is of the highest importance for the formal, functional and exegetical interpretation of the thanksgivings. This conclusion states not only the basic but also the central characteristics of the

thanksgivings, both as to form and function. In it the majority of the structural, stylistic, functional and exegetical problems contained in the thanksgivings find their adequate and final solution. It is, fortunately, not a new thesis; but it may safely be said that its full significance has never been adequately appraised and its implications for the study of Paul's style in general have hardly been realized at all.

In order to interpret the structural and functional characteristics of the Pauline thanksgivings objectively, it proved desirable to view them in the light of pertinent usages elsewhere. At this point we found ourselves forced to launch out upon the undertaking of analyzing all usages of εὐχαριστῶ, etc. throughout the Hellenistic world, so that we might avoid the treacherous pitfalls and self-defeating purpose of deliberate and arbitrary parallel-hunting. The aim of this broad survey was to recognize, define and interpret the various functional usages of our terms and their consequent structural characteristics. This search led us from the usage in the Pauline thanksgivings through the length of all his letters, the pseudo-Pauline epistles of the New Testament, the Christian literature of the first and second centuries, the Septuagint, Philo, Epictetus (and Stoicism in general), the inscriptions and papyri.

In these sources we made a number of significant observations regarding the functional usages and their consequent structural characteristics. We shall summarize these main observations together with additional generalizations to which they give rise.

I. In the epistolary papyri we found (1) that the papyri convincingly attest a wide-spread conventional use of an epistolary, religious or non-religious, introductory thanksgiving.

(2) The papyrus letters attest three typically epistolary

usages of εὐχαριστῶ and--nothing else.

(3) The function of the epistolary thanksgiving in the papyrus letters is to focus the epistolary situation obtaining in the case of each letter, i.e., to introduce the vital theme of the letter.

(4) The (originally liturgical) variant of this epistolary thanksgiving is employed only when a certain, definite religious experience or attitude enters into the epistolary situation; both the addressant and the addressee must be able to share in it.

(5) This was naturally not necessary when the "direct" (addressant--addressee) thanksgiving was employed.

(6) But either type is employed only when the entire letter is distinguished by a higher than average intimacy and formality. (Since the official letters lack "intimacy" it becomes likely that this very fact accounts for the absence of a thanksgiving in letters of this type.)

(7) Accordingly, the thanksgivings themselves are highly intimate and formally dignified.

(8) The standards of real intimacy and of genuine formal dignity do not preclude conventionality and fixity of syntactical construction; they require it.

(9) The thanksgivings of the papyrus letters exhibit the same essential, structural characteristics as the Pauline thanksgivings do; both Pauline types (Ia and Ib) have their parallels in the papyrus documents. At the same time there is a measurable degree and amount of structural variation, produced--generally speaking--by the differences between the specific epistolary situations. (These differences include the differences in personalities as well as in groups, in social as well as in topographical environment.)

(10) The εὐχαριστῶ thanksgiving has no monopoly on intimacy and formal excellence of epistolary writing. Its use as well as its absence depend on a great many selectively operating social forces.

(11) The significant fact that the liturgical-epistolary thanksgiving presupposes a definite type of religious experience on the part of the addressant and of the addressee forces us to identify this religious experience wherever we can find the data for it. Thus the papyrus usage requires the study of the religious and philosophical usage represented by such widely varying sources as the inscriptions, the theological and philosophical authors both pagan and Christian. This means methodologically that no lexicographical and grammatical problem can be fully solved, unless direct and exhaustive reference is made to the social forces of which every word and every phrase of every human language is a direct product. Lexicography and literary criticism thus become disciplines of social history.

II. The evidence furnished by the inscriptions is twofold:

A. (12) There is in the earlier as well as in the Roman periods of the Hellenistic age a politically significant, social control (spontaneous as well as institutional), which finds its typical linguistic expression in epigraphically published decrees, on statues and tablets. (Other sources also attest this usage of εὐχαριστῶ, etc.)

B. (13) There are, correspondingly, certain definite and powerful εὐχαριστία attitudes and speculations which find their expression on religious and liturgical inscriptions, votive tablets, commemorations of intercessory prayer joined with thanksgiving, directions for mastering the techniques for magic, etc.

(14) A number of inscriptional documents, both political

and religious, exhibit very close functional and structural resemblances to the Pauline thanksgivings.

(15) This observation calls emphatic and convincing attention to the fact that the Pauline letters--functionally as well as formally--occupy a position between epigraphical documents (which were intended for publication) and the humble, though formal and intimate private letters (which were intended for the ephemeral use of the immediate addressee). This conclusion has far-reaching consequences for the formal as well as the historical interpretation of the Pauline letters. Moreover, it is effectively confirmed by the blunt historical fact, which no responsible student will "explain" as an "accident," that the recipients of the Pauline letters used, preserved and finally published them.¹

(16) Both the political and the religious inscriptions bear an eloquent testimony to those correlative, interacting social forces--the political and the religious εὐχαριστία attitude and theory.

¹The methodological as well as the factual importance of this point invites a digression. The intention of the author to publish his epistolary product has played an overimportant rôle in certain discussions of the formal and functional character of the Pauline letters (see esp. A. Deissmann, Licht vom Osten (Tübingen, 1923), pp. 193-206). Deissmann's influential pet-theory is that Paul intended no publication (ibid., p. 198); therefore, he argues, they are private letters, pure and simple. But the problem is not so simple. The intention of the addressee to publish an epistolary document is a vastly more important criterion of the functional and formal character of a letter than the (possibly) arbitrary intention of the author. The "addressees" (i.e., the public) are the ultimate judges in every case, whether a letter deserves publication or not. The mere intention on the part of an author, nor even the "fact" of mechanical publication through the stone-mason or the printer do not at all decide the all-important issue of the functional and formal adequacy and efficacy necessary for factual publication. As a pertinent illustration of the publication of a real letter which was obviously not meant for publication by the author mention may be made to the letter of the Emperor Claudius to the City of the Alexandrians (edited by H. I. Bell, Jews and Christians in Egypt (London, 1924), pp. 1-37; the number of the papyrus is Brit. Mus. 1912). The preface to the published letter (ibid., p. 23) was written by the proconsul of Egypt, who explicitly assumes the responsibility for the publication.

III. (17) It is not until we examine Philo and Epictetus (Stoicism), Paul and Justin that we are able to define the contents of the religious εὐχαριστία experience and its subsequent theological rationalizations, and to evaluate their social efficacy in the Hellenistic society.

(18) This picture of the religious experience and its attending theories permit us to interpret more fully and correctly several Pauline passages, especially those which exhibit the paraenetical and the speculative usage of εὐχαριστω, etc., in the light of this generally Hellenistic type of piety and theology.

IV. (19) It is the presence and the real vitality of this religious experience and its corresponding rationalizations in the Hellenistic world which is indispensable for the full understanding of the Pauline thanksgivings which occupy such a prominent position in his letters, and which constitute a characteristic feature of his epistolographic technique. The writing of the epistolary thanksgivings is with Paul a matter of firm and meaningful habit. Indeed, that especially the Pauline thanksgivings can only be adequately understood as products of vital attitudes and social situations, should be evident upon only a cursory examination. The objective and comprehensive interpretation cannot but recognize this fact as extremely significant.

(20) The direct exegesis of the Pauline thanksgivings with reference to the letters to which they belong reveals beyond the shadow of a doubt their strictly epistolary form and function.¹ The reference to the extra-Pauline Hellenistic, epistolary thanksgivings confirms the exegetical judgment fully and convincingly.

¹It need hardly be stated that the detailed demonstration of this judgment would require an independent monograph dealing with the structural and functional relations existing between each thanksgiving and the letter proper which it introduces.

We have seen that there are two structural types of thanksgivings in the Pauline letters (Ia and Ib). Is there also a consequent functional difference between them? One is tempted to answer: Yes. Is it not obvious, that the type Ib is structurally less elaborate, functionally less intimate and less personal? Is not the type Ia more elaborate, more intimate and more personal? Are we not justified on the basis of the actual observations made in our study to advance the following constructive hypothesis, even at the risk of oversimplification and exaggeration, with full awareness that the construction is suggestive rather than apodictic? To wit: The structurally more elaborate thanksgivings of the type Ia (Philem., I Thess., Col., and Phil.) characterize the more elaborate, intimate and personal letters of Paul; the simpler thanksgivings (I Cor., Rom., and II Thess.) characterize the structurally less elaborate and functionally less intimate, less personal letters; the still less intimate εὐλογητός-prooemium of II Cor. (1:3-11) characterizes that letter which is directed to a church with which Paul is in open battle over personal matters. (It does not matter that Paul wrote this letter with the serious purpose of reestablishing peace with the Corinthians;) in Galatians Paul has suppressed the thanksgiving altogether, because his addressees have radically broken with him and his gospel.

(21) The fact of the formal and functional superiority of the Pauline thanksgivings in comparison to all other Hellenistic, epistolary thanksgivings does not by any means imply that Paul, besides being a Hellenist, is also something else or something more (a Jew or a Christian, a mystic or a prophet), but it can only mean that he is more of a Hellenist than the "average" Hellenist.

(22) In view of the fortunate fact that the terms εὐχαρί-

στῶ, etc. are neither so common as to be trivial, nor so abstract as to be artificial, but that they are terms typical of normal social life denoting socially effective forces; and in view of the further fact that Paul uses these terms more frequently and in a greater variety of functions and with stronger emphasis than any other comparable unit of sources, we are fully justified in concluding that Paul was not just a Jew who was "exposed" to Hellenistic "influences," but that he was an indigenous Hellenist, normally assimilated to those strata of the Hellenistic society which his upbringing and his social standing (in Tarsus) and his missionary life-work (which carried him back and forth through the North-Mediterranean provinces) ascribed to him. He is not an intellectualistic Hellenist like Philo, nor a utilitarian Hellenist like Josephus, but a spontaneous Hellenist like Epictetus; only, he is not a teacher of Stoic philosophy; he is a preacher of the Christian gospel. This judgment does in no wise invalidate or even modify Paul's own self-assessment (Phil. 3:5), Ἑβραῖος ἐξ Ἑβραίων. This succinct statement of a biological fact, however, irresistibly suggests a variation as a statement of social fact--Ἑλληνίστης ἐξ Ἑλληνιστῶν.

(23) From the Pauline letters we chose the thanksgivings for a comparative study of their form and function, because they are formally and functionally comparable materials. It may safely be expected that the method developed in the course of our study and the results obtained by it will become fruitful not only for the literary and historical interpretation of the Pauline letters in general, but that they will materially assist in identifying other sections from the Pauline letters which may be subjected to a similar comparative analysis. The paraenetic sections (the προσηγορίαι ἐπισταλτικοί παραινετικάί of Proclus), for example,

are an example in point. Then, eventually we would be in a position, furnished with objective facts and objective methods, to identify, describe and interpret the style of Paul and thereby contribute materially to the historical understanding of Paul himself, Ἑλληνίστης ἐξ Ἑλληνιστῶν.

